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SUBJECT: MEDIA REACTION: AL-WASILA VISIT TO WASHINGTON

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: The Sudanese press closely reported on the August 27-30 visit to Washington by Sudan's State Minister at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Samani Al-Wasila. Claiming that this visit was the first of its kind in over a decade, most papers included a daily update of every stage of the visit. Several papers speculated that Wasila's visit would eventually lead to, if not immediately result in, the lifting of U.S. sanctions on Sudan, the release of Sudanese detainees in Guantanamo (including Al-Jazeera cameraman Sami Al-Haj), and Sudan's removal from the list of state sponsors of terror. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) On August 25, the Sudanese press reported that Al-Wasila had departed to Washington. "Al-Wan," a newspaper affiliated with the Popular Congress Party, reported that preparations for the visit were ongoing for the last month and that there was an atmosphere of cautious optimism surrounding this visit.

¶3. (U) On August 29, "Al-Sahafa" reported that Wasila discussed a number of issues including U.S.-Sudanese bilateral relations, the situation in Darfur, and Sudanese citizens detained in Guantanamo. Wasila reportedly warned U.S. officials that a number of countries want to divide Sudan. He said "if there is any group in the United States or anywhere else that wants to divide Sudan, we tell them that it is going to be a difficult mission because the division of Sudan will lead to the division of 56 other African countries."

¶4. (U) On August 30, the opening story in the independent "Al-Sudani" stated that the Government of Sudan expressed its optimism about the delegation's visit, and its hope for a breakthrough in bilateral relations. MFA official spokesman Ali Al-Saddiq stated that differences between Sudan and Washington go back to the beginning of the 1980's, and that the global environment has changed greatly since then. Al-Saddiq added that U.S. economic sanctions and the listing of Sudan as a state sponsor of terrorism are the main factors that contributed to the deterioration of bilateral relations. He voiced skepticism towards U.S. promises, saying "they promise, but do not fulfill their promises." He added that the Government of Sudan will not grant any concessions to the U.S., and stated that the time for directing relations through the media has passed.

¶5. (U) "Al-Sudani" also presented two "expert opinions." Dr. Ibrahim Mirghani, dean of the faculty of Strategic Studies and Political Sciences at Al-Azhari University, ruled out the possibility of a dramatic improvement in Sudanese-American relations. He alleged that every time the Government of Sudan tries to normalize its relations, the U.S. imposes new conditions on Sudan. Conversely, political analyst Yousif Al-Sayed stated that he expects a breakthrough in relations between the two countries. However, he stated that U.S. foreign policy is influenced by the "Zionist lobby" which directs the American government to "issue decisions against the Government of Sudan."

¶6. (U) On September 2, the pro-government "Al-Rai Al-Aam gave prominent coverage to Wasila's visit with the following three headlines: "Washington thanks the [Sudanese] government for

dismantling extremist groups;" "Natsios will visit Khartoum in the coming days;" and "The U.S. moves toward lifting Sudan from the list of [state sponsors] of terrorism." According to the daily, "Credible sources in Washington stated that George W. Bush has begun to seriously consider lifting economic sanctions on Sudan after the deployment of UN troops to Darfur this coming October." It went on to state that Washington has granted permission to let the Sudanese Charge' d'Affaires in Washington, John Leuth Ukec, visit two Sudanese detainees in Guantanamo, and that two of the nine detainees will soon be released.

¶7. (U) The article in "Al-Rai Al-Aam" further reported that Wasila found his meetings "honest, positive, and beneficial." He added that "[This visit] will reflect positively on the relationship between the two countries." Wasila also stated that the talks "touched upon all lingering issues between the two countries." The daily cited "credible sources" as saying that Washington was specifically interested in construction on the new U.S. Embassy in Khartoum, and conveyed that it is annoyed that Sudanese authorities have obstructed containers of building material from entering Sudan.

¶8. (U) COMMENT. The Sudanese media's focus on Wasila's visit revealed many unrealistic expectations. Many reports and commentaries expected nothing less than the release of detainees, the lifting of sanctions, and the removal of Sudan from the list of state sponsors of terrorism. We continue to try to manage expectations and respond where necessary to outright distortions of the truth. END COMMENT.

FERNANDEZ